

The City of Seattle

## Landmarks Preservation Board

700 Third Avenue • 6th floor • Seattle, Washington 98104 • (206) 684-0228

LPB 198/89

### REPORT ON DESIGNATION

Name and Address of Property: Admiral Theater  
2343 California Avenue S.W.  
Seattle, Washington

Legal Description: Olympic Heights Addition, Block 1, Lots 11-18

At the public hearing held on June 7, 1989, the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board voted to approve designation of the Admiral Theater as a Seattle Landmark based upon satisfaction of the following criteria of Ordinance 106348:

Section 3.01(2): It is associated in a significant way with the life of a person important in the history of the city, state, or nation;

Section 3.01(3): It is associated in a significant way with a significant aspect of the cultural, political, or economic heritage of the community, city, state or nation;

Section 3.01(4): It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or of a method of construction;

Section 3.01(5): It is an outstanding work of a designer or builder;

Section 3.01(6): Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age, or scale, it is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood or the city and contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or the city.

## DESCRIPTION

Since 1942, the Admiral Theater has occupied a prominent seven-lot site on California Avenue SW in West Seattle. The Art Moderne-styled theater is situated at the heart of the Admiral District's shopping area, just northwest of a major commercial intersection at California Avenue and Admiral Way. Near this junction, both of these important arterials are lined exclusively with single or two-story commercial uses, and with multi-family apartments. On the blocks immediately off these arterials is an extensive residential neighborhood of single family homes.

Immediately south of the theater is a large parcel of land most recently used as a service station and currently under theater ownership. The station now stands boarded up and vacant. Adjoining the Admiral to the north is a single-story wood-frame building in use as a tavern. To the west of the theater, at its rear, an alley separates the commercial blocks on California from the residential properties on 45th Avenue SW.

The nautically-inspired Admiral Theater is a two-story structure of cast concrete, 109 feet by 125 feet in dimension. Its massing is comprised of two major elements perpendicular to one another. The lobby and foyer at the south end of the complex incorporates the pre-existing shell of the old Portola Theater, and fronts directly upon the sidewalk. The auditorium extends north from it, paralleling California Avenue. This larger portion of the building is clearly distinguishable by its setback from the sidewalk and its arched-truss roof configuration at right angles to the lobby. Stepped parapets and intervals of decorative pipe railing at the roofline tie the entire length of the facade together.

At street level the Admiral features two single-story commercial spaces that project with smooth curved facades from the face of the building. These asymmetrical elements add considerable interest to the street elevation and contribute to the strength of its Moderne design. The northernmost storefront was intended from the outset to be a separate leasable space, extends all the way to the rear of the lot. This space was originally occupied by a furniture store, and more recently by Puckerfield's ice-cream parlor. The southernmost storefront was designed as a theater coat-check room, but was converted within the first year to a lunchroom. It operated for many years as the Admiral Fountain Cafe. Neither of these storefronts has been altered to any extent on the exterior, with the exception of a small addition to the cafe.

Framed between the street-level shopfronts are two below-grade exit doors leading from the auditorium itself. The doors are unobtrusive, subtly incorporated into an original scheme of raised curvilinear planting beds, defined by a semi-circular sunken pathway. There are two rear exits from the auditorium into the alley.



The formal theater entrance at the far south end of the California Avenue facade still retains its early terrazzo floor with dolphin motifs. Curved wall surfaces highlighted with blue waves draw theater-goers back to triple entry doors that give access to the lobby. The present ticket booth and marquee are flat, rectilinear 1970's replacements.

On its exterior surface, the theater is painted off-white with a texture cement paint. The simple but effective decorative treatment is characterized by continuous horizontal grooves, variously spaced, that impart the look of a modern streamlined vessel. Porthole-like windows are ornamentally placed and a playful border of waves in relief lines the parapet. These and other modest facade details are highlighted in the current color scheme of nautical blues, red, and yellow.

A sizeable mural depicting the landing of Captain Vancouver dominates the interior of the lobby. The artist presented the historic event with a stylized, ornamental approach that works well with the Art-Moderne theme of the interior as a whole. The 30-foot high ceiling of the foyer, now painted a deep marine blue, features two original suspended light fixtures with etched glass seahorses. Straight ahead are the lounges, originally billed as the "cosmetic room" and "smoking room," and the men's and ladies' restrooms. A curved-wall staircase separates these areas and leads to the balcony foyer and seating above. Off to the right, opposite the popcorn stand and Vancouver mural, are the four original entrances to the auditorium complete with curved reveals. The present decor is true to the nautical theme, with white walls and original woodwork detail highlighted in red and blue.

The interior of the auditorium was converted in 1973 to twin theaters. Wall surfaces are draped with a sound deadening drapery that obscures the original murals on the outer walls. (Note: these undersea-theme murals were inspected as part of the Landmarks Preservation board pre-designation tour of the building on May 5, 1989. Photos of these murals are included in the designation record.) The projecting appliques of these sea-life murals were apparently removed and/or damaged during the 1973 remodelling, but the murals are otherwise intact. A dropped ceiling and an expanded projection booth for each side have obscured some familiar features.

When it opened to the public in 1942, the exterior of the Priteca-designed theater looked much as it does today. The original marquee, now missing, was one feature that added considerable style to the facade. Free-standing neon letters spelled ADMIRAL atop the neon-lined marquee which projected in a triangular fashion over the sidewalk. The marquee was characteristically Moderne, as was the blue ceramic tile skin that faced the columns and curved wall surfaces of the entryway. Perched above the parapet wall over the main entry was a flagpole, or mast, with a whimsical crow's nest. Opening night photographs indicate that the management rigged banners from the mast, on that occasion at least, to heighten the nautical mood.

In its spatial configuration and circulation, the early Admiral lobby was virtually the same as it is today. But surface treatments, the work of decorator and long-time Priteca associate Tony Heinsbergen, conveyed the marine theme more forcefully then than now. The walls were panelled in imitation of a ship's hold, with mahogany, teak, ornamental walnut, and oak. At least two patterns of panelling were devised, one a parquet effect which surrounded the Vancouver mural. The ceiling was painted with abstract, cloudlike forms, a circular compass motif at the center. There were decorative sea-shell borders painted above the balcony railing and along ceiling beam surfaces. A green shellfish-patterned carpet (a remnant of which was in storage in the theater as of May, 1989), indirect wall-mounted lighting, and comfortable "cruise" furniture tied together the interior design.

The auditorium created a still more intensive undersea sensation. The ceiling was suspended and flat, except for a large curvilinear shape recessed perhaps six inches. Within that fluid form a central stenciled compass was surrounded by signs of the zodiac. Light fixtures were streamlined, cylindrical forms with incised sea motifs.

To the rear and sides, the balcony walls were a solid color, detailed with horizontal banding and curved surfaces to stimulate a ship's construction. Portholes with painted views and applied star ornaments enlivened the effect.

Forward on the auditorium walls were murals depicting undersea life. Special lighting effects made these "coves" appear to shimmer and glow in the dark. There were borders of seagulls and shells above and below. Flanking the screen, fluted engaged columns, and wood panelling decorated with ship medallions disguised the house speaker systems behind one thousand leather upholstered seats faced carpeted steps that rose gently to a shallow restroom and the silver screen above.

Changes to the Admiral were brought about largely by the remodeling of 1973, but some minor alterations occurred earlier. In 1953, a wide panoramic screen was installed at the Admiral, three times the size of the original. In 1960, the owners made a small concrete block addition to the exterior of the tiny Admiral Fountain Cafe.

Architect Alfred Croonquist undertook the 1973 remodeling and bifurcation of the Admiral for the Sterling Recreation Organization in 1973. The project included the following: a sound-deadening partition at the center of the auditorium and at the each rear, a new concrete slab topping over the auditorium floor, a new suspended grid ceiling with a sound baffle frame, an expanded projection room that occupied two balcony seating sections, and new seats and screens. Permit drawings reveal that decorative features flanking the stage were removed for the installation of new sound systems.

The lobby was left unchanged in this renovation, so it is unclear exactly when the wood panelling was covered or removed. According to one oral history source, the panelling was removed in the 1950's. Outside the theater, 1973 "improvements" included a new ticket booth, new aluminum entrance doors, and the replacement of the distinctive blue tiles with plaster cement. The removal of the mast and crow's nest occurred around this same time, as did the unfortunate replacement of the original Admiral Theater marquee.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

The 47-year-old Admiral Theater is the last surviving movie house in West Seattle. Beyond its considerable sentimental and associative value to thousands of community residents, the Admiral holds an important place in the development of cinema architecture citywide. Its significance to the cultural heritage of Seattle is demonstrated in five applicable criteria for landmark designation.

As Seattle's only remaining example of B. Marcus Priteca's original neighborhood movie house design, the Admiral's ties to this internationally-famed hometown architect are significant (Criterion 2). Constructed at the onset of World War II, the Admiral represents the final peak of popularity in a nationwide cultural and economic phenomenon, the neighborhood theater (Criterion 3). Stylistically the Admiral illustrates an important transition from the ornate picture palace architecture of the 1920s and '30s to a streamlined moderne aesthetic of the 1940's and '50s (Criterion 4). The Admiral Theater is an outstanding work of P. Marcus Priteca and of A.B. Heinsbergen (Criterion #5). And finally, the theater stands prominently at the commercial center of the West Seattle Admiral District, its distinctive styling and size clearly contributing to the identity of that neighborhood (Criterion 6).

#### Criteria 2 and 5

The long and eminently successful career of Admiral Theater architect B. Marcus Priteca was based in Seattle, the city of his choice. Priteca gained fame throughout the western United States and Canada for his profile work in the design of vaudeville houses, theaters, and picture palaces. Elegant ornament was his stock in trade, but Priteca theaters were noted as well for their excellent acoustics and perfect sightlines. His life's work encompassed other kinds of projects, but the completion of over sixty major theaters and one hundred sixty minor theaters earned Priteca the title "Last of the Giants" in theater architecture.

Priteca emigrated to Seattle from Scotland in 1909. He was attracted in part by the preparations for the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. Initially employed by theater designer E.W. Houghton as a draftsman, Priteca focused his energies on architectural illustrations and research. His exuberant style



soon came to the attention of Seattle's own theater magnate Alexander Pantages, who launched Priteca's career with a commission for the San Francisco Pantages vaudeville house in 1911.

At the age of 21, Priteca became the sole architect for the Pantages circuit, the largest privately owned vaudeville circuit in the world. He worked for other major clients as well, including the Orpheum Corporation and Warner Brothers. In later years, he produced perhaps a half-dozen designs for the Seattle-based Sterling Recreation Organization of John Danz.

Priteca's ties to the Northwest were strong. He was quoted as viewing Washington and Oregon as the center of the world. Here in Seattle, he designed three grand downtown theaters - the Seattle Pantages (later the Palomar) in 1913, the Coliseum Theater (the world's first motion picture palace) in 1916, and the Seattle Orpheum in 1927. Of these major large-capacity houses, only the Coliseum remains.

With the rise of the smaller neighborhood theaters in the 1930s and '40s, Priteca's work spread into outlying communities of Seattle. Some of his neighborhood designs were remodels of existing theaters, among them the Grenada in West Seattle (now demolished), the Majestic/Bay in Ballard (1949), the Neptune in the University District (1935), and the Uptown on Queen Anne (1946, since remodeled again).

Only two of Seattle's neighborhood theaters were originally designed by Priteca, and these were the Admiral Theater in West Seattle, completed in 1942, and the Magnolia Theater in Magnolia, completed in 1948. On both of these projects, Priteca collaborated with the decorator A.B. "Tony" Heinsbergen. The floral-styled Magnolia was demolished in 1975 to make way for a bank, leaving the Admiral as the sole surviving example of Priteca's original work in the neighborhoods. Remodels of existing theaters aside, the case might be made that the Admiral and the Coliseum are the only two original Priteca theater designs still extant in Seattle.

According to expert testimony given by Priteca scholar Richard McCann at the designation hearing, the Admiral Theater is the only nautical-themed example of Priteca's career, and his only example of curvilinear "leisure" architecture as expressed in the application of the steamship-moderne style. The executorial style as well as subject matter is unique in the context of Priteca's work. Mr. McCann also testified that the interior decorative work of the A.B. Heinsbergen firm is an outstanding and unique example of this designer's work. The Admiral Theater is the result of the collaboration of the Pritica and the Heinsbergen firms.

### Criterion 3

An important aspect of 20th century American culture was the immense popularity of the neighborhood movie theater. The Admiral Theater fits squarely into that genre.

Local movie showings satisfied the rising demand for wholesome family entertainment and affordable night life. Theaters became community gathering places for all age groups. With roots in the privately owned nickelodeons of the 1910s, neighborhood movies soon shared the stage with live performances in larger vaudeville theaters. By the mid-1920s, however, the heyday of the picture palace had arrived, and in addition to big downtown theaters the major Hollywood studios often built and operated lavish suburban houses as well. Between 1920 and 1928, no less than twenty-eight theaters opened throughout Seattle's neighborhoods.

West Seattle kept pace with the rest of a movie-mad America. At least six picture palaces of varying sizes and styles went up on the West Side between 1910 and 1927. Largest and most ornate was the Spanish-styled Grenada Theater on California and Hudson with its vertical "skyrocket" electric marquee, its Wurlitzer pipe organ, its plush furnishings and its modern "auto park". More modest in scale, but no less popular was the Admiral District's Portola Theater designed by architect V.W. Vorhees for owner W.T. Campbell in 1919. Through the 1920s, the Portola engaged in stiff competition with the Apollo Theater, another small but successful house in the West Seattle "Junction." Permit drawings indicate that masonry shell of the 44' x 109' Portola Theater was incorporated in its entirety into the new Admiral Theater when it was built in 1941, thus adding 23 years to the tradition of neighborhood movie showings at this location.

Although movie attendance actually declined in the 1930's during the economic burden of the Depression, neighborhood theaters as a group, with fewer seats and lower overhead, held their own. Even the big studios such as Warner Brothers shifted focus to the smaller neighborhood houses. By 1936, John Danz's Seattle-born Sterling Theater Company operated six local movie houses, and was on the verge of expansion.

Danz made a first foray into West Seattle in 1926, but his plans to build a 1,400-seat theater in the Junction came to naught. In the summer of 1938, he again announced intentions to build a major new West Seattle theater and commercial building. Plans were being prepared, the local West Seattle Herald noted, for a "modernistic style" theater on the site of the Portola at California and Admiral Way.

World War II brought a much-needed economic boost to the movie industry. A final surge of popularity boosted attendance in a trend that lasted through the immediate post-war years.



In West Seattle, the advent of war no doubt inspired Sterling officials to stage a contest to select a name for the new theater. As ground was broken in the summer of 1941, over 90 local contestants overwhelmingly selected the name "Admiral" and each won a month's free pass to the theater. John Danz waxed patriotic in the local press, asserting that the judges, all local politicians, community leaders, and Sterling officials

"felt that this was just another way to demonstrate the efficacy of the democratic way of doing things. We can say what we like, what we like and go where we like - and yes, name our own theaters. That, we feel, explains why the United States is the greatest country in the world."

The patriotism of the day found its way into the nautical theme of the theater inside and out, and the fervor of war pushed the construction to completion in six short months. As the opening grew near, it was given great play in the Seattle press. Newspapers billed the Admiral as the "last word in showhouse design", the fulfillment of John Danz's long-time dream, the perfect theater "soon to become the recreational mecca of the district." A proud and grateful West Seattle audience of 3,000 attended opening night at the Admiral on January 22, 1942.

The Admiral stood at the crest of the last wave of neighborhood theater construction in Seattle. Eight other suburban theaters went up in the years from 1934-1951, among them the Green Lake, the Varsity, the Crest, and the Lake City. But in 1951, the completion of John Danz's Northgate Theater in the innovative new shopping mall marked the beginning of the end for the local movie house. Neighborhood theaters could not compete with the draw of the shopping center nor the deadly competition of an entirely new mode of entertainment, television.

The attrition of Seattle's neighborhood theaters has been relentless. Their loss was analyzed in a study completed in 1986. Of 66 movie theaters identified as opening between 1910 and 1951, only 13 remained in operation as theaters at the time of the study. Of the 53 that had closed their doors, 24 were known to have been demolished, the remainder remodeled in largely insensitive ways. Since 1986, at least two more have folded. One of these is the Admiral Theater, the last of six West Side picture palaces.

#### Criterion 4

The architecture and decoration of motion picture theaters closely followed the changing fortunes of the movie industry both nationally and locally. The Admiral Theater represents an important period of transition in theater design from the ornate embellishment of the Roaring Twenties to today's technically-efficient, functional austerity.



The heyday of the picture palace inspired the flash and gaudiness of the Seattle Orpheum, the exotic opulence of the Fifth Avenue theater, and on a neighborhood scale, the dreamlike fantasy of the West Side's Grenada Theater. The "atmospheric" theater with its illusionary outdoor setting and twinkling night sky, was first created by architect John Eberson in the Houston Majestic in 1923, and was only one of any number of such imaginative treatments employed by the palace architects in the 1920s. Exteriors were wildly exotic, characterized by the magic of the vibrant electric light marquee.

Theater architecture began to change in the 1930s with a nationwide move to the visually rich yet less expensive ornament of Art Deco. Economics dictated a simplification in design. While major Art Deco palaces such as the Hollywood Pantages carried the spirit of the golden age into the Depression, the smaller neighborhood houses moved rather quickly into the clean lines and unadorned surfaces of the Moderne.

"A revelation of sight, sound, and modern comfort" - contemporary descriptions of the Admiral at the time of its opening in 1942 reflect an emphasis on comfort, simplicity, and the latest in technology. Apparently of greatest excitement were its innovative features such as "push-back seats," earphones for the hard-of-hearing, the "no-draft" ventilation system, and distortion-free sound and projection equipment. The spacious 1000-seat auditorium was designed for "movies only," and that eliminated the need for the "cumbersome stage and footlighting."

Yet in the Admiral, architectural style and ornament still clearly had a major role to play. The streamlined Art Moderne look of the Priteca exterior established a theme that would be further interpreted inside the theater. In the lobby and auditorium, Heinsbergen's decorative touch was consistently applied in stylized abstract forms that were simple yet compelling. Bold murals depicting nautical and undersea themes; star, shell, and wave motifs in relief; simulated ship surfaces and finishes and richly-patterned sea green carpeting together achieved an effect that was both fanciful and clean. Soft indirect lighting in the lobby, and special lighting effects in the auditorium tied the whole together to create a mood, an encompassing sense of place. The interior of the Admiral is a unique example of a "3-D aquarium" constructed of plaster and paint.

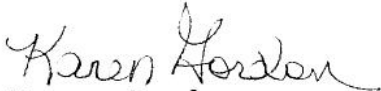
The transitional 1940's Moderne style of the Admiral remains visible despite the bifurcation ("twinning") of the theater by architect Alfred Croonquist in 1973. The crisp Moderne lines of the exterior are unaltered except for the removal of the projecting marquee and crow's-nest. The remodelling left the floor plan of the lobby essentially untouched, and it is here that the nautical theme is still clearly readable. In the auditorium, unique undersea murals on the outer walls remain under sound-deadening drapery.

Criterion 6

The Admiral Theater is prominently sited at the major West Seattle intersection of California Avenue and Admiral Way. This intersection forms the center of the Admiral District shopping area and is locally known as the "Little Junction". Because of its key location, the great size of the theater with its two associated store fronts, is especially apparent. The building is clearly one of the largest commercial structures in the vicinity. Its name and location, its sheer size, and its distinctive Moderne styling have imparted a special identity to the neighborhood for 47 years.

The features of the Landmark to be preserved, include: The entire exterior of the building, including the roof and the planters, and the following features of the interior: the main lobby including the restrooms and anterooms, the balcony/mezzanine (excluding the offices and rooms off the balcony) and the stairway to the mezzanine, and the theater auditorium, excluding the center partition wall, the north wall/proscenium, the ceiling, the floor and the theater seating.

Issued: June 19, 1989



Karen Gordon  
City Historic Preservation Officer

KG:dlv

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